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# What Are We For?

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# What Are We For?

**W**HAT are we for?" Here is a problem which arises some time in the life of every man and woman. One possible solution was indicated so interestingly by a leading physician of one of our metropolitan hospitals that it has seemed worth while to record our talks in the hope that these conversations may assist others in working out for themselves their own particular answer to this problem, "What are we for?"

Our conversations began in this way. As he worked on me medically we came to the subject of religion. (Perhaps you have noticed that when two men get together, sooner or later their talk turns to things spiritual.)

"I used to think," the doctor said, "that you monks had some strange medieval ideas, but I've come to the conclusion that they are not so bad,—some quite good in fact."



“Which one in particular do you like?” I asked.

“Well,” said the man of science, “if I understand you correctly, you believe that the worship of Almighty God is a very important matter. Am I right?”

“Yes. We believe that worship is what we are made for. As an old catechism says, ‘We are created to know God, to love God, to serve God, to work along with God, here in this world and forever in heaven.’ Just as everything in the world has a purpose, so man has a reason for his creation. Man’s purpose is to praise God and out of that adoring life of union with God to work for Him and His children.”

“I see,” said the doctor, as he gave me another jab. “The idea is, ‘O come let us sing unto the Lord,’ ‘O come let us worship and fall down,’ ‘We praise Thee O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord,’ ‘Sing we merrily unto God’—and so on. Is that correct?”

“That’s our belief in general. May I enlarge on it a little?”

“Go ahead, go on, let’s hear what you have to say.”



“Well,” I said, “you see it’s something like this. In the first place, we believe in God. That’s one of the hardest acts of faith to make,—to believe that God exists, that He is a personal God, and a God of love. It’s difficult to express what we mean by belief in God, but among other things we believe that God is something like a father. We say ‘something like a father,’ because no one knows what the perfect and all-wise heavenly Father is like, for the simple reason that no man in this life can know perfection. What we can’t know, we can’t know. That is, we can’t form a complete idea of what our heavenly Father is like. But we can know something about Him, by considering the analogy of an earthly father. Of course the illustration is very inadequate. All we can say is that God is something like an earthly father. Do I make myself clear?”

“More or less. . . . This is going to hurt. . . . Now, go on.”

“Well, what is it that an earthly father wants of his son? Isn’t it companionship with his boy? He wants it both for his own sake and also for the boy’s sake. He knows that if he and his son



can live together in mutual trust and comradeship, all the other primary and important things will take care of themselves."

"What are some of the things which are important and which will grow out of this union of father and son?" asked the doctor.

"Well, perhaps first of all, freedom."

"Freedom," said the medical authority, "how is that primary?"

"It is something like this. When a child is young, he learns chiefly through obedience. He has to be taught dogmatically. Such things as good table manners and other social amenities he must take on the authority of his parents. The foundation of his education is such complete confidence in his father that he will accept his teaching unquestionably."

"Then later on," I continued, "on the basis of the trust and confidence by which he practiced obedience, the boy must learn to choose for himself. All through these early childhood days he has been learning, not only obedience, but faith. He has learned in two ways, first, didactically, and secondly, through the silent pressure of his father's loving personality on him and his life."



I don't remember much of what my father said; but I shall never forget what he was."

"So there was gradually substituted for the child's exterior obedience an interior one,—a response to his father's ideals. As a young man once said to me, 'Dad never told me to do anything,—but I always knew what he wanted.' In passing, one might say that it takes a lot of love and trust on the father's part to stand back and permit the boy to make his own choices. But the great point is that out of the lad's companionship with his father and inspired by his father's love, the son learns to choose in the light of his ideals. He responds to his father. And that is what we mean by worship,—response to God."

"What's this?" said the man of science, "what do you mean by worship as response? I don't quite get you."

"Let me take refuge in quotation," I said, pulling a book out of my pocket. "I have just been reading this essay of Dr. Kirk's on the subject of worship. He says, 'By worship we mean, I suppose, the dedication of self to another,—the offering to him, or her, of the whole personality,



—heart, imagination, will, purposes, all in one. . . .’ When we speak of a child worshipping its parents, we mean that it hangs on the every word and look and action, and attempts in its childish way to anticipate each of its father’s needs, and repay each one of its mother’s cares, with a new act of loving service. It is no accident that the New Testament speaks of the proper relation of Christians to God as identical with that of children towards their father.”

“I’m beginning to get the idea,” said the doctor, laying down his instruments, “but have you any other authorities you can give me? We men of science are partial to authorities, you know.”

“I’ll do the best I can, quoting from memory. Father Thornton has written a fine book entitled ‘The Incarnate Lord.’ In it (I can send you the exact references later, if you wish them,) he says something like this: ‘This universe is the handiwork of a living, creative God and exists for the manifestation of God and His goodness. In more precise language, creation comes from God and must find its goal in its Creator. His glory and His goodness can be truly and fully manifested by the return of His gifts to Him in



the worship which only created spirits can render.' ”

“Very well put,” said the doctor, “it sounds like something that I once heard Fr. Huntington say in a sermon. I’ve forgotten everything except this one sentence, ‘I come from God, I belong to God, I go to God.’ Does that express the idea?”

“That’s it exactly.”

“Good. But now about the matter of morals. I suppose you would say, and I think you are right, that if a man loves and serves God, his morals will take care of themselves.”

“That’s about it. The young man who is truly in love does not worry about his morals. He is so much in love, so desirous of pleasing his sweetheart, that he naturally does the right thing. But he is saved from priggishness because he doesn’t think about his actions. He is guided into right paths because of his worship.”

“That’s a very good illustration,” said the doctor. “Just one other thing remains to be cleared up. How about service of others? Is the Catholic just out to save his own soul?”

“Certainly not, and every time you hear that



lie, just nail it. We believe that we are 'saved to serve.' Our purpose, to repeat myself, is to know and serve God, and to work along with God, here in this world, and forever and ever in heaven. Some have said that the most glorious of all glorious work is to work with God for the good of His creation. Worship to be really perfect must include the return of all of God's creation. We call all men to worship God because if they will look away from themselves to God their lives, and, through them, all men, will become more godlike. The more godlike any man is, the more of a real man he is."

"That's very true," said the doctor. "I quite agree with you on that idea. But I would like to check upon something we were saying a while back."

"What was that?"

"Well, you did not seem very enthusiastic in your reply when I said that 'if a man loves and serves God, his morals will take care of themselves.' Your reply did not seem very hearty. How about it?"

"Well," I said, "I'm glad that you noticed that. There was a reason for it. You see, I was think-



ing over the point in my mind. I think the exact words of my answer were, 'That's about it.'"

"You're right. But explain yourself. . . . No, better wait a moment. . . . This may hurt a bit. . . . There you are. . . . Now go ahead."

"Thank you. . . . That didn't hurt at all. . . . Sorry to disappoint you! . . . Well, to get going. The point is that the statement is all right if we understand quite clearly the connotations of the words 'serves God.' The sentence, 'If a man loves and serves God, his morals will take care of themselves,' is a true statement if the word 'serves' is intended to cover the field of a man's whole moral action. But if the word 'serves' is merely intended to describe a man's worship of God, the statement is inadequate."

"Just what do you mean?" said the doctor, "I don't quite follow you."

"You see, it's this way. Our worship of God must pass from the altar into the life of everyday action in the world. We are 'saved to serve' others. Our purpose in life is to know God, to love God, to serve God, and to work along with God, here in this world and for ever in heaven. Someone has said, 'the most divine of all divine



works is to work with God.' Our union with God and our worship of God must pass into work for Him and for all His children. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, indeed. . . . Just wait a minute while I do this. . . . All right, go ahead."

"What I was trying to say was that, if we were perfect, the transfer from vision to action would take place without any effort on our part. In God, knowledge and action are simultaneous, and one passes into the other automatically. But with us men, it costs a lot, so to speak, to pass from the intellectual to the volitional,—that is, from theory to action."

"You mean that it is because we are free agents and not puppets, men possessed of free will and not slaves, that it requires effort to make our choices?"

"That's it exactly. It's often very hard to make a choice. Making decisions costs a lot."

"But it seems to me," pursued the man of science, "that there is more involved than just the initial cost of coming to a decision. Does not any choice of high ideals require much in the way of a whole life of self-discipline? Can a right



choice be made at all, without a great deal of previous self-sacrifice? For instance, I decided as a mere youth to be a doctor. As I look back now, I am sure I was greatly influenced in this decision by the silent example of my mother, a most remarkable woman. But my father was a poor man. The whole family had to give up a lot so that the children could have proper educations. It took a lot of hard work to get me into my profession, and it requires constant study now. Is that what you mean by the costliness of passing from vision to life?"

"That's it exactly," I said, "you've put it very well. Now, I'm convinced that every man has an ideal and wants to 'be something.' But every soul must have the courage to live out his vision in real life, and that means hard work and perseverance. The life of our Lord, for example, opens with the song of the angels at Bethlehem, but Christmas is soon followed by Lent and Passiontide with the emphasis on suffering and the Cross. Another example of what I mean is in the Mass. The Sanctus with its note of vision and praise is quickly followed by the Canon with its mention of 'the night in which He was



betrayed.' Do I make myself clear?"

"The sum and substance of what you are saying is, as I understand it, that the highest duty of man is to worship God and then to live out this worship among men, no matter what the cost. Is that your meaning?"

"Yes, indeed. Worship is not to be pigeon-holed after an hour or so of Sunday church, but must reshape and recreate all the events of the following week. Just as in the life of our Lord, after His Transfiguration, He descended into the plain to heal a lunatic child, and then went on steadily to His Passion, so, after our vision and worship of God, we must live out our ideal in terms of an every day life of loving-kindness and self-sacrifice. This is not easy. In a word, the way of love is the way of the Cross."

"But what do you mean by the Cross?" asked the doctor as he laid down his instruments.

"Well, I see that you are through with me for today. Suppose we wait until next time for our discussion of the Cross. I'm afraid we can't settle that in just 'a few well-chosen words.' "

"All right, we'll talk about the Cross when you come again."



## II

THE next time I called on the doctor he was just back from his holiday. In answer to inquiries about his vacation, he said, "I've had a fine time, just the kind of a holiday I like,—fishing, eating, sleeping, a little reading. I must show you some of the pictures we took. . . There! What do you think of that for a catch of fish,—and all in one morning?"

While I admired the snap shots of life in a Canadian village, the doctor performed the usual ritual of the washing of the hands.

"Well, what were we going to talk about to-day?"

"Wasn't it what we meant by the Cross?"

"That's it, that's it! Now you talk while I do this little job. The trouble with me is that I talk too darn much. Wait a moment. . . . There, now go ahead."

"Ouch, that hurt, if you want to know! Well, suppose I give a short definition of what we mean by the Cross, and then follow it up with an explanation"

"That's O. K. with me," said the man of science, "go ahead."



"The best definition of the Cross that I know is one which was given me when I was a student in the Seminary. We were all making a retreat. . . ."

"Retreat," said the doctor, "what's that?"

"Well, we had taken some time off from the usual round of our studies and were all keeping silence during which we heard some addresses in the chapel about the priestly life."

"A sort of spiritual review of your life, I suppose?"

"That's it. Well, the conductor of the retreat. . . ."

"Conductor? What's that?" asked the doctor.

"The leader, the man who gives the addresses."

"I see. Go on. Don't pay any attention to my interruptions. I told you I talked too darn much. I should have used a stronger word."

"The conductor said, 'The Cross means doing the Will of God.' I remember that the Dean commented on that sentence, saying that it was the best definition of the Cross he had ever heard. I would like to enlarge on that a bit, and say that the Cross means doing the Will of God



joyfully and gladly. The Cross is the free and joyful choice of the Will of God. Will that do for a working definition?"

"Sounds all right to me. Let me see if I've got it. The Cross means doing the Will of God joyfully. Is that right?"

"Right! Now let me explain why this choice of God and His Will is so important. You see, we must face the fact that all is not well in the world, though God is in His heaven. There is a tremendous struggle going on, a fight between good and evil. Why that should be need not concern us now. The fact of the present situation is that, look where you will, in nature, in commerce, in the professions, in history, in the life of man, there is a conflict in progress, a combat between life and death. Such struggle means suffering. Fr. Maturin has a wonderful passage about pain and suffering in one of his books which I've brought along. May I read you from this book?"

"Go ahead. No! Just wait a moment while I look. . . . All right."

"Fr. Maturin says . . ."

"Who was he?"



“He was once Rector of St. Clement’s, Philadelphia.”

“All right. Read it.”

“Fr. Maturin says, ‘Suffering in our present state, is indeed an integral part of the life of sacrifice, so much so that we scarcely think of sacrifice as apart from suffering, but it is good for us, when we are called upon to make the most painful sacrifice, to remember that there is no necessary connection between the two ideas. Originally there certainly was none; when Adam stood in Eden, clad in the garment of original righteousness, and cast himself in worship before God, it was his supremest joy to offer himself; there was no obstacle between him and God to hold him back, no barrier obstructing the will through which it had to force its way. And certainly the hosts of angels know no life apart from God, and have no will save His; yet their life of heavenly joy and peace, into which no pain or discord has ever entered, is a life of sacrifice. So far as we know there is but one spot in creation where there is any association between suffering and sacrifice, or where there is associated with obeying the Will



of God any idea of difficulty or pain, and that is here on earth. For here sin has entered and set up barriers between man and God; but we look backward and forward, and see that originally it was not so, and hereafter it shall not be so. Such a condition belongs only to our present state; here we must fight our way in spite of all the obstacles that seek to hold us back from doing God's Will, knowing that whatever it cost us, it is our only true life, and that the struggle and the pain are the conditions of our regaining our true relationship to Him and forever rejoicing in His Will.' "

"What do you think of that?" I asked. "Does it help?"

"A fine passage. Now suppose I try to put it in my words."

"That's a good idea. Go ahead."

"Well," said the man of science, "as I understand it, the end of our life is to praise God, and to work for God. This life of worship and work is described as doing the Will of God. In the beginning, and in heaven, it is natural and easy to do God's Will. But in the mean time, while we live in a world of struggle, it is often hard.



That doing of the divine Will, whether easy or hard, is called the life of the Cross. Is that what you mean?"

"That's just fine,—as far as you have gone. The great hallmark of the Cross is its free and voluntary character. We have been given free wills and we must freely choose God. Of course we are not entirely free. We had no choice about our birth and our parents. And above all, we had no choice about being free. We must always remember that. We must choose freely, but our freedom is conditioned by the fact that we must choose. God did not create us puppets or slaves or robots, but God made us His children. When we freely choose the Will of God we are bearing the Cross of Christ. Dr. Barry has a fine passage about the Cross. . . ."

"Who is Dr. Barry?"

"He was for many years the Rector of the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, in New York City."

"Thank you. What has he to say? Did you bring his book, too?"

"No, I could not carry the whole library! I'll have to paraphrase from memory. Dr. Barry



says in his book, 'The Invitations of our Lord' something to this effect,—that there is a great deal of misapprehension about the Cross. Many people, he thinks, mean by the Cross whatever of the disagreeable comes into their lives. If some suffering or hardship comes along, many people pull a pious look and say in an unctuous voice, 'Well, it's my Cross and I'm trying to bear it.' Of course many of the hard things that the Providential ordering of our lives sends us may be the bearing of the Cross, but only when they are willingly accepted. Nothing can be a Cross that we are not willing to have."

"You mean," said the doctor, "that the Cross is the voluntary limiting of our lives, and that the Cross is something assumed?"

"Yes," I said, "that is what the Cross meant to our Lord. The Incarnate Life was willingly assumed by our Lord. He was willing to suffer pain because He willed the end of His work and that involved suffering. He accepted death on the same terms. 'Therefore doth my Father love Me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No one taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself.' Christ accepted the Cross will-



ingly and bore it to the end. And the Cross must mean the same thing, essentially, in our lives.”

“I see all that,” said the man of science, “but I do not see anything especially Christian in this process. Is not self-limitation and suffering the ordinary lot of any one who wishes to do a great work? The physician goes the same road. No one thinks of offering a doctor sympathy when he shuts himself up in a laboratory to discover some great benefit for humanity. A friend of mine is trying to discover a cure for rheumatism. To do this he must voluntarily limit his life.”

“You are quite right,” I said. “It is only when men limit themselves to serve a crucified Master that they are thought odd. Cross bearing is a perfectly natural process and the Christian should be as ready to bear pain and suffering as the explorer or the mother or the athlete in the Olympic games.”

“That’s fine. But you spoke of another characteristic of the Cross besides that of suffering. What is the other side of the matter?”

“The other side of the Cross is its joy and splendour. But there is not time today to talk



about the exaltation of the Cross.”

“No, some one is waiting for me. We can reserve that for another time.”

### III

**T**HE doctor had been unaccountably silent while he made his examination. I was wondering if perhaps he was not feeling quite well and whether we would have our usual talk about religion. At last he laid down his instruments and said, “Well, I guess I can’t do anything more for you.”

“You mean that I need not come any more?”

“Yes, you seem to be all right for the time being. But drop in about six months from now and I’ll check up on you.”

“Thank you very much. I’ve enjoyed coming and am grateful to you, not only for your medical work but also for our talks. I shall miss them very much.”

“So shall I,” said the doctor, “and, by the way, were we not to finish up something we were discussing last time? What was it?”

“We were talking about the meaning of the Cross. We had said that the Cross meant doing



the will of God. We had discussed the suffering which was involved. But there is another side to the question."

"What's the other side? I know that there are usually two sides to a story,—sometimes twenty-two,—so it's not surprising that there is more to talk about. What is it?"

"Have you got a few moments to spare?"

"Sure. Mrs. Wilkins is due, but she's late as usual. So go ahead."

"Well, most of life, if you stop to think about it, is 'bitter-sweet.' The Cross, as we said, means doing God's will. But the Cross is not all pain and suffering. The Cross means obeying God, willingly and joyfully. There is a certain splendour and joyousness about every sacrifice. The medieval painters tried to give us an impression of happiness when they painted the sufferings of the Saints. Do you know, perhaps, that picture, I think it is at Assisi, of St. Francis stripping himself of all that he had, in order that he might give himself more completely to God?"

"Yes, I remember it well," said the doctor, "but at the time I saw it a number of years ago, I was more interested in the wonderful colour



effects. Of course what the painter was trying to show was this joy of sacrifice. And by the way, isn't there another picture somewhere which tells the same story? I never understood the point before. It shows the Massacre of the Holy Innocents. But instead of presenting a scene of sorrow and anguish, the children are dancing down a road, singing and playing with their palms and crowns. Do you know that picture?"

"I've heard Father Huntington preach about it, but I don't know where it is, or who painted it."

"And that suggests something else which I was reading about the other day. It was an article about the religious dances of ancient Spain. In addition to the well-known dance on Corpus Christi Day, it described a pageant of the Way of the Cross in which, while Christ agonizes under His Cross, St. Michael dances along the Way of Sorrows. I suppose that there is a great truth which painting and pageantry are trying to teach. Is this what you are talking about? Do explain."

"I'll do my best, but it's very hard, as the joy



of the Cross is a very mysterious experience. There is not much about it in the Bible. We have, of course, that famous text, 'Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross,' and there is the well-known passage about our Lord's rejoicing at the return of the seventy disciples. But the joy of the Cross is something that must be experienced to understand it. It is witnessed to in the martyrdoms of the Saints."

"What ones, for instance?"

"Well, however different may be the circumstances of the death of the Saints, there is always present this note of joy. Sometimes it is hidden, but often it is quite apparent. The Saints knew this exaltation of happiness because they knew that they were united with their Lord in His Passion. They had loved Him all through their lives, and now they were to be united with Him for ever. The agonies of one night in the amphitheatre were nothing in comparison with the joys which would last for ever. As St. Polycarp said at his death, when he was urged to recant, 'Four score and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any harm but much good; how then can I blaspheme my King and Sa-



viour?" The happiness of union with our Lord was no affair of next day,—it began with the martyrdom."

"And you believe that the joy of the martyrs was real?"

"Yes, indeed. One may be a play-actor in a show, but one does not go in for play-acting when one is soaked with oil and trussed up to be a torch at one of Nero's garden parties. One does not have heart for play-acting when one hears the roars of hungry lions. In all their sufferings the Saints were really happy."

"Can you give some examples?"

"Yes, I'll give you a few instances. First of all from the Breviary . . ."

"Breviary, what's a breviary?"

"The Breviary is the ancient prayer book of the Church. Its witness is valuable because the worship of the Church is an expression of the mind of the Church, just as your engagement book reflects your life and work, or as the sketch book of an artist shows examples of his ideals. Do you see the value of the witness of the Breviary?"

"I see, go on."



“Well, there is a lovely antiphon, or prayer, in the Breviary for St. Andrew’s Day. Let me see if I can remember it. No, I’ll read it to you, for I have my Breviary in my pocket. Here it is. ‘When Blessed Andrew came to the place where the Cross had been prepared, he cried out and said: O goodly Cross, so long desired, and now made ready for my eager spirit; fearless and joyful, do I come to thee: therefore do thou receive me gladly as His disciple who did hang upon thee.’ ”

“Very beautiful,” said the doctor. “Any more?”

“Yes, indeed, several more.”

“What is it?” said the doctor to the nurse who had entered.

“Mrs. Wilkins is here.”

“Well, let her wait a while. She’s kept me waiting.” He turned to me. “Go on, please.”

“This is in the Office for St. Agnes’ Day. She was just a young girl when she suffered, but her words are much the same as the aged St. Andrew. ‘Blessed Agnes, in the midst of the flames, stretched out her hands and prayed: I call upon Thee, O Father transcendent, august and dread;



for by Thy holy Son's protection I have escaped the threats of an impious tyrant, and passed unscathed through the foulness of fleshly pollution: and behold, I come to Thee, whom I have loved, whom I have sought, whom I have always desired.' It's true that there is no mention of joy, but the whole prayer breathes a rapture of happiness. Or listen to this little joke which St. Laurence cracked when he was being roasted to death on the gridiron: 'Blessed Laurence, when laid and burning on the iron grating, spake to the impious tyrant saying: the feast is ready, turn and eat.' I guess there was a real happiness in that man's heart if he could make a superb joke like that when he was being roasted to death. What do you think?"

"I think you're right about their sincerity."

"Just one more, one that I'm especially fond of because it comes from one of the great feasts of our Order, the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, on September fourteenth. Listen: 'O Cross, surpassing all the stars in splendour, world renowned, exceeding dear unto the hearts of men, holier than all things: thou only wert counted worthy this world's ransom to uphold.



Sweet the wood, sweet the iron, bearing so sweet a burden.' ”

“That’s very fine as far as the Breviary is concerned. Have you any other witness to offer?”

“Yes, besides the official prayer of the Church, there is the witness of the tradition of the Church. Just as your family has certain stories of which it is very fond, so the Family of God has its folk-lore. Do you know the story of the martyrdom of St. Felicitas?”

“No, who was she?”

“St. Felicitas was a slave and her joy in martyrdom was manifested in another way. While awaiting her execution, she became a mother. In her pangs she cried out. When the jailer asked her how she expected to endure the savagery of the wild beasts in the arena if she could not bear her birth pangs any better, she replied, ‘What I now suffer I suffer myself, but tomorrow in the arena there will be Another who will suffer with me, because I shall also suffer for Him.’ ”

“Well, I guess you’ve given enough of illustration. What’s the truth behind these stories?”

“I’ve tried to show, from painting and pag-



eant, from the Breviary and from tradition, that there are two sides to the Cross, the suffering and the joy. The suffering is obvious, the happiness is more hidden. It always seemed to me that there were two scenes in the life of our Lord, exteriorly very different, but both trying to teach the same lesson. Those two events were the Transfiguration of our Lord and His Agony in the Garden. Both events were concerned with His death. It might be said that the Transfiguration is the way God looks at Gethsemane. For a day, there is pain and suffering and tribulation. But through that pain is manifested the joy of doing God's will. Satan laughed as he looked at our Lord on the Way of the Cross,—and St. Michael danced down that Sorrowful Street with great joy. Which one was right?"

"Well, I guess the angels know their business. . . . And I wish more people understood about this ideal of Christian living as helping to solve the problem, 'What are we for?'"